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Leftwing party gains ground with sceptical stance on NATO, Israel, Ukraine, Immigration

A new alternative for Germany?

Sahra Wagenknecht, the combative, charismatic leader of a new leftwing party, is tired of leftist liberalism. So who's she appealing to, and why?

by Pierre Rimbert & Peter Wahl

Left? Which left? In January one German party offered the public a new answer to this old question: the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice (BSW). After years of watching conflicting views tear Die Linke (The Left) apart, its leader Sahra Wagenknecht decided to set up her own party (1), taking with her several MPs and creating considerable buzz.

Wagenknecht, a former communist activist and brilliant intellectual who is very popular in former East Germany, her birthplace, has finally been able to expand on the vision she embodies – that of a 'conservative left', a counterpoint to the Greens' progressive, urban and university-educated constituency. The BSW, which leans left on labour and economic questions, is more conservative on immigration and cultural issues. It prefers a sort of sovereigntism within the EU, and criticises NATO and Germany's recent warmongering, while fiercely defending freedom of speech. Wagenknecht hopes this genuine people's party will be able to 'speak to the majority' (2), rescuing victims of globalisation from the far right.

Just after its launch, when many voters were still unfamiliar with its name, the BSW landed six seats in this June's European election with 6.2% of the national vote (2.5 million), surpassing even the Liberals (FDP, 5.2%) and leaving Die Linke (2.7%) far behind. The party scored 12-16% of votes in the eastern Länder, coming in third behind the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Post-election polls show that the bulk of BSW ballots were cast by former supporters of the left (580,000 from the Social Democratic Party or SPD, 470,000 from Die Linke) and the Greens (150,000), as well as past non-voters (140,000). Yet one in five BSW electors had previously voted on the right - either for the CDU (260,000) or the FDP (230,000) - not to mention the 160,000 votes wrested from AfD (3).

This distribution suggests three things. First, a majority of BSW voters see it as a leftist party. Second, while its gamble to peel off far-right voters hasn't failed, it hasn't yet had a decisive victory. Third, the cascade of votes from the centre and the right seems to justify Wagenknecht's ambition to build a social bloc uniting the working class with small and medium enterprise owners and managers, rather than urban progressives.

Twenty years of wavering

Leftists in Western countries have spent nearly 20 years wavering between two strategies for countering both social democracies' capitulation to neoliberal policies and the rise of rightwing nationalist movements. The first option is to rebuild the traditional coalition linking working-class – no longer in major urban centres – and educated middle-class voters. Die Linke, composed of a hodgepodge of Eastern communist holdovers and Western social movements, embarked on this in 2007 when it was founded, to combat the SPD's rightward shift.

Yet the more it chose to embody a societal and environmental avant-garde, the more blue-collar votes it lost. When Jean-Luc Mélenchon launched France's Left Party (PG) in 2009, he explicitly modelled it after Die Linke, inviting its cofounder Oskar Lafontaine to the PG's inauguration. A similar approach seemed to gain momentum elsewhere as the financial crisis wreaked havoc worldwide.

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In the UK, trade unions and radicalised students propelled Jeremy Corbyn to the top of Labour in 2015, just months after the Syriza party in Greece dealt a crushing blow to the socialists, briefly uniting politically active graduates with a salaried workforce that had been steamrollered by austerity. The following year, Bernie Sanders gave the Clinton dynasty a run for its money in the US Democratic primaries.

This strategy hit a major stumbling block, however: the working class (manual and non-manual employees) and urban middle class were now positioned at opposite ends of the ideological and political spectrum due to geographical, economic, educational and income inequalities (4). 'Patronising yuppies' and 'deplorable racists' found each other so repellent that a united front seemed a distant fantasy.

Following Barack Obama's 2008 victory, a second strategy cemented the idea that 'the leftist vote no longer centres on the working class' (5). Instead, the plan was to bring together minorities, progressives, environmentalists and the young, whatever their socioeconomic or geopolitical differences.

Die Linke joined the French and German Greens in pursuing this tactic, which La France Insoumise (LFI) disparaged even as it took a comparable path. Mélenchon, by then head of LFI, described an emerging 'unprecedented political force': 'urban, networked masses' – college students, teachers, and white-collar progressives from city centres, along with suburban workers, most of them immigrants from former French colonies – all united against oligarchy (6). There was no way to win back suburban working-class voters, where far-right scores kept climbing. 'What they care about most is racism' (7), said Mélenchon, exposing a rather fatalistic view. Although political identities are normally shaped by living conditions and political activism, he suggested that a xenophobic party's voters were immune to change.

Vitriolic critique of 'leftist liberalism'

Both strategies entailed appealing to educated people. By contrast, Wagenknecht intends to distance herself from them. Her 2021 bestseller *Die Selbstgerechten* (The Self-Righteous) opens with a vitriolic critique of 'leftist liberalism', whose 'grassroots are the affluent, university-educated urban middle class'. This sanctimonious, arrogant, pro-European and well-travelled 'lifestyle left' celebrates particularism, derides 'common values' and shows only contempt for the losers of globalisation who've failed to pick up on trending cultural and linguistic conventions.

For Wagenknecht, this left embraces the existing economic order while pushing a set of sociocultural demands – what American philosopher Nancy Fraser calls 'progressive neoliberalism'. Wagenknecht writes that 'most leftist parties are composed of university graduates elected by well-educated and economically insulated city dwellers,' referring to *Capital and Ideology* by French economist Thomas Piketty.

As a popular party, the BSW wishes to ally with the other end of the middle class: technicians, engineers, craftspeople and independent workers from the Mittelstand, which encompasses both the social middle and the network of family businesses that supplies machine tools and high-tech robots to the Rhine industrial system. Wagenknecht sees a parallel between working-class people harmed by globalisation and middle-class owners of small and medium enterprises being choked out by speculators. The latter, she says, 'fall victim to economic insecurity as well; they are under pressure from large corporations, banks, digital behemoths; they suffer from policies shaped by these powerful lobbies.'

Wagenknecht concedes that 'an alliance of this kind does have its contradictions': one constituency exploits the other's labour. Yet such a bloc, with the prestige that the Mittelstand enjoys in Germany, could also focus the fight on a common enemy: large financial firms, the oligopoly that controls the digital ecosystem, the supranational bodies clamouring for deregulation – in a nutshell 'Blackrock capitalism', a linguistic swipe at CDU leader Friedrich Merz, presumptive conservative

candidate for chancellor and former supervisory board chair of the investment fund's German division.

This is the basis for the BSW's economic platform. Its policies are leftist classics: empowering trade unions, aggressive redistribution through taxation, investing in public services and infrastructure, combatting poverty etc. Other measures, such as defending family capital over market-based finance, dismantling monopolies and subsidising technological innovation, are geared to helping small and medium enterprises. This priority is also reflected in the party leadership, including for example Amira Mohamed Ali, who is both an MP and BSW co-chair (with Wagenknecht), but started her career managing legal affairs for an automotive supplier.

While socialising the means of production is no longer on the agenda, Wagenknecht imagines three distinct ownership structures: a private, for-profit model would be maintained for small and medium enterprises in industries where competition actually works; larger companies would operate as jointly managed private foundations closed to outside investors; and essential services and infrastructure would be public interest entities off-limits to markets (8). This is a modern take on a strategy that some Western European communist parties followed post-1968 under the label 'antimonopolistic alliance' - employees teaming up with small and medium enterprises against big capital.

'Cultural identities mask social ones'

The BSW intends to unpack markers of identity and culture, which in today's society have a greater effect on political affinity than socioeconomic circumstances. 'I'm positive that some cultural struggles are actually social,' Wagenknecht told us. By the same token, she believes that 'cultural identities also mask social ones.' This comes across in the party's environmental vision. As energy prices have risen, the exemplary individual behaviours the Greens have preached in terms of transportation, food and heating fit into a 'privileged lifestyle' out of reach for suburban low-income populations, who resent feeling judged. 'This is a social conflict that's being expressed in cultural terms,' Wagenknecht said. Therefore, she noted in a recent interview, it's important to 'make sure that the costs of pursuing ambitious emissions-reduction deadlines are not imposed on ordinary people who already have a hard time making ends meet' (9).

The question is crucial in a country that has depended so heavily on exporting petrol-powered vehicles to Asia. There's a deep fear of falling behind as the world transitions to EVs and the global economy looks poised to fragment. Rather than banning diesel cars, the BSW is calling for a more policy-based environmental approach where key sectors like energy are renationalised and Germany's economy is 'de-globalised': 'This is less about consuming differently, than it is about producing differently. Our economy must become more regional, 'less toxic and more respectful of resources', with technological innovation provided by the Mittelstand companies.

Environmentalism may not be a top BSW priority, but immigration certainly is. In 2015 Wagenknecht expressed her disagreement with Angela Merkel's decision to welcome a million refugees. Her stance faced strong criticism within Die Linke, which advocates open borders. Since

then, popular enthusiasm for helping migrants integrate has given way to an anguished debate influenced by many factors: fears of Islamist terrorism, an ageing population, a soaring far right and the arrival of one million Ukrainians since 2022.

'The poorest pay the price'

The BSW supports restrictive immigration policies and seeks to reframe the issue as a social one. Its platform remains cautious, 'rejecting racist ideologies' while asserting 'the right to asylum for anyone politically persecuted in their home country' and stressing 'the cultural wealth that immigration and coexistence can bring' (10). However, according to Wagenknecht, the influx of recent years has aggravated the housing shortage, overburdened welfare resources and worsened the crisis in the education system because the government refused to expand its resources for new arrivals. 'In all these sectors, the public infrastructure and institutions are overwhelmed,' she notes. 'And it's the poorest who pay the price.'

The party's European programme describes the emergence of 'parallel societies influenced by Islamism' and vows to 'put an end to uncontrolled EU-bound immigration' (11). How? Primarily by outsourcing the asylum application process to third countries or neighbours of the EU, a measure called for by 15 of the 27 member states. One more traditional stance suggests that the root causes of exile should be addressed via fair global economic relationships and geopolitical policy that would end the West's wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

Progressive media and social media influencers, incensed by Wagenknecht's posture on immigration as well as her criticism of cultural leftism, at first summed up her political vision as an 'anti-migrant left' essentially indistinguishable from the far right (12). This conflation gradually gave way to more methodical analysis by curious researchers. In France, two thinktanks - the Foundation for Political Innovation (Fondapol) and the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) - drew up detailed (and critical) studies of the new party (13).

And in April, the *New Left Review*, a renowned Marxist journal, published a long interview with the BSW's founder. On the effects of immigration, she said: 'To point to real social shortages - demand outstripping capacity - is not xenophobic … [It is the] intense competition for scarce resources … that does fuel xenophobia.' No sooner had the interview been announced on X than outraged know-it-alls began decrying that a platform was being given to a 'fascist'.

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Socioeconomic criticism of immigration policy has always embarrassed the progressive left, which is often tempted to dodge the issue in the name of fighting racism. But the right and liberals aren't much more at ease. They admit that Germany's declining population creates a need for labour immigration, but assert that if the state is to avoid exacerbating tensions, it must make massive investments in services for new arrivals. This would require ending fiscal austerity, which these parties are reluctant to do. An initial study of the BSW's electorate, commissioned by the foundation of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB, which is close to the Social Democrats), suggests that the party appeals to a much broader audience than just the white middle class in the east. 'Proportionally, immigrant respondents have a higher propensity to vote for the BSW than non-immigrant ones,' the report observes (14).

Along with immigration, the fact that the party bears its founder's name is another lightning rod for criticism within the traditional left. Thanks to strong charisma - always cause for suspicion in Germany - the BSW's founder packs rally venues and entertains viewers on political TV shows where she often trounces her opponents. Her rejection of mandatory vaccination, denunciation of public health policies during the pandemic and defence of free speech fuel near-constant controversy about her personality.

Over time, Wagenknecht has crafted her image as a serious, elegant, cerebral media icon, a modern Rosa Luxemburg. Her fame raises questions: is the party just her launchpad, or is it the other way around? As if to dispel any ambiguity, other figures have emerged, including financial crime expert Fabio De Masi, who led the BSW list in the European election, and co-chair Mohamed Ali; the party will drop its founder's name after the 2025 legislative election. Meanwhile, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance has a vertical power structure (a Leninist model) and carefully screens all new members to avoid infiltration by 'careerists, trolls' or far-right moles. The party doesn't much want a Podemos-like, 'gaseous' movement (to use Mélenchon's term).

On the other hand, one of Wagenknecht's takeaways from other post-2015 'leftwing populist' experiments is a refusal to wave the red flag. Her movement 'is a de facto part of the leftist tradition. But we don't express it that way simply because it's no longer understood,' she explains. 'Today's left - and I think it's a real shame - has become a flashpoint for many, as they associate it with Robert Habeck or Annalena Baerbock,' two Green ministers in the current government who, in her eyes, personify the progressive bourgeoisie. The BSW presents its left-leaning views in a discourse intended to be unifying, to speak to the working class: 'We accept the fact that a society needs shared culture and traditions. A welfare state, for example, cannot function without a common identity or sense of belonging.'

Rejecting federalism

Wagenknecht's positions on Europe, the war in Ukraine and NATO are anything but off-the-shelf. Like Mélenchon's Left Front in the 2014 European election, the 2024 BSW campaign was imbued

with a strong sovereigntism: it rejected federalism, called for shrinking the European Commission's reach and for the 'non-implementation' of directives deemed unreasonable. While the party calls for extensive cooperation with some member states on environmental protection, financial and fiscal regulation, energy and infrastructure, it advocates a return to national sovereignty to counter the Commission's neoliberal programme and Von der Leyen's bellicose foreign policy tendencies. Its critiques of Brussels for welcoming big-business lobbyists resonate with small and medium enterprises, which resent the Commission's interventionism.

The topic of Ukraine is more present – and divisive – in German public debate than in France. Only the US supplies more arms to Kyiv than Berlin. While mainstream media describe the country as an interior front in the fight against the 'evil empire', ordinary Germans strongly favour a negotiated solution. Wagenknecht condemned Russia's February 2022 invasion, but she holds NATO's eastward expansion partly responsible for the conflict and disagrees with its proxy war against Russia. In the fall of 2023 she and feminist Alice Schwarzer circulated a petition that collected more than 900,000 signatures, appealing for an end to the violence and arms deliveries.

Further, the BSW called for negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, a gradual lifting of sanctions and, in the near future, peaceful coexistence and cooperation with Russia. The new party opposes Germany's massive rearmament and denounces society's increasingly militarised mindset. This brand of pacifism - previously a hallmark of the Greens, who are now among the fiercest warmongers - is widely popular in the 'new Länder' (former East Germany) and one of the main factors in the BSW's success. Less vocal regarding Gaza - a topic on which free speech is limited in Germany (15) - Wagenknecht wants an immediate ceasefire and the termination of German arms shipments to Israel, in stark contrast to AfD's unconditional support of Tel Aviv.

Without explicitly calling for quitting NATO, the BSW wants 'greater autonomy from the US' and envisions 'a new security alliance where everybody is an equal partner, including Russia. This amounts to a rejection of the current NATO.' Facing a rising global South, Europe should stop trying to force inappropriate 'values' on it. Wagenknecht says, 'I'm against any foreign policy that travels the globe with its finger raised, telling other states how they should operate. This behaviour is deeply hypocritical and misleading: our government says little as Saudi Arabia beheads dissidents, but in conversations with China it poses as a leading human rights advocate.'

After a rather successful first electoral test in June, the BSW isn't too worried about September regional elections in the former East German states of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. Abhor their disruptive competitor though they might, the other parties acknowledge its potential to mitigate far-right results in these states where it is far ahead in the polls. The impending 2025 federal election promises to be risky for socialists and Greens, members of the governing coalition seen as responsible for the economic crisis. A BSW breakthrough, especially if it halts the rise of the far right, could then reshape the contours – and priorities – of the German left.

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Translated by Jeremy Sorkin

(1) See Peter Wahl, 'How Germany's left lost its way', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, January 2022.

(2) Unless otherwise noted, Sahra Wagenknecht's quotes come either from an interview with the authors in Berlin on 10 April 2024 or the book in which she lays out her platform *Die Selbstgerechten: Mein Gegenprogramm - für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt* (The Self-Righteous: My Counter-Programme for Public Spirit and Cohesion), Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 2021.

(3) 'Wie die Wähler wanderten', Tagesschau, 8 July 2024, www.tagesschau.de/ [http://www.tagesschau.de/].

(4) See Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Holt, New York, 2004; and *Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2016. See also Pierre Rimbert, 'Quelle coalition face au bloc bourgeois? [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2022/02/RIMBERT/64369]' (Which coalition can take on the bourgeois bloc?), *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2022.

(5) Bruno Jeanbart, Olivier Ferrand and Romain Prudent, 'Gauche: quelle majorité électorale pour 2012? [https://tnova.fr/democratie/politique-institutions/gauche-quelle-majorite-electorale-pour-2012/]' (The left: which electoral majority in 2012?), Terra Nova, Paris, 10 May 2011.

(6) Jean-Luc Mélenchon with Marc Endeweld, *Le Choix de l'insoumission*, Seuil, Paris, 2016.

(7) *La Repubblica*, Rome, 21 July 2024.

(8) She expands on this in her book *Reichtum ohne Gier: Wie wir uns vor dem Kapitalismus retten* (Wealth without Greed: How to Save Ourselves From Capitalism), Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 2016.

(9) Sahra Wagenknecht, 'Condition of Germany [https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii146/articles/sahra-wagenknecht-condition-of-germany]', *New Left Review*, no 146, London, March-April 2024.

(10) BSW, 'Unser Parteiprogramm', Berlin, 2024, bsw-vg.de/.

(11) BSW, 'Programm für die Europawahl 2024', Berlin, 2024, bsw-vg.de/.

(12) See Pierre Rimbert 'Gauche antimigrants, une fable médiatique [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2018/10/RIMBERT/59118]' (Antimigrant left: a media invention'), *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2018.

(13) Patrick Moreau, 'L'émergence d'une gauche conservatrice en Allemagne: l'Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht pour la raison et la justice (BSW)' (An emerging conservative left in Germany: the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance - Reason and Justice (BSW)), Foundation for Political Innovation, Paris, January 2024; and Thorsten Holzhauser, 'Ni à gauche ni à droite, mais les deux à la fois? L'Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) au lendemain des élections européennes' (Neither left nor right, but both at once? The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) in the aftermath of the European elections), *Note du Comité d'études des relations franco-allemandes (CERFA)* (Notes from the Research Committee on German-French Relations) no 178, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris, July 2024.

(14) Helge Emmler and Daniel Seikel, 'Wer wählt "Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht"?' (Who votes for the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance?), WSI Report, no 94, June 2024, www.wsi.de/ [http://www.wsi.de/]. See also Albrecht Meier, 'BSW im Umfrage-Hoch: Wagenknecht-Partei punktet vor allem bei Deutsch-Türken' (BSW high in the polls: Wagenknecht's party mostly scores points among Turkish Germans), *Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, 31 July 2024.

(15) See Sonia Combe, 'Peut-on critiquer Israël en Allemagne? [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2023/04/COMBE/65651]' (Can one criticise Israel in Germany?), *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 2023.